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AUDIO REVIEW
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THREE BIG SPEAKERS

Paul Messenger gets to play with the Spendor SP200, the Graham Audio VOTU and the B&W 802 D3

A SYSTEM OF NOTE

Chris Frankland tries out a relatively affordable complete system from Audio Note (UK)

MAGICO S5 RE-INVENTED

Five years on, Magico has released a MkII version of the S5. Martin Colloms assesses the results

JL AUDIO + ATC

This issue we've given Kevin Fiske a solid-state sub/sat system, to try and expand his world view!

NVA's INTRO SYSTEM

£650 for a serious hi-fi system? NVA sells direct in order to keep prices exceptionally low

MQA DACs

Harry Harrison and Chris Bryant finally get to try a couple of MQA-equipped DACs

MUSIC & MORE

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

Mytek Brooklyn DAC

iFi Pro iCAN

Audio Note TT-1+Arm-One+iQ3

Audio Note OTO SE Phono Signature

Audio Note CD 1.1x

Audio Note AN-J Lx Hemp
KEF Carlton

Spendor SP200

Graham Audio VOTU

B&W 802 D3

NVA Intro System

JL Audio CR-1

JL Audio Fathom F112 V2

Magico S5 II

Audioquest DragonFly

Meridian Explorer2

Dynaudio Emit M10

SLIC Eclipse C MkII

Vertex AQ Pico

Audience OHNO III

EnKlein David Digital





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I am sometimes accused of Luddism, less perhaps for preferring vinyl over CD than my scepticism about computer audio in general (he says, just as his server starts working again!). However, it seems that I'm by no means alone, as others too are finding that the computer is not necessarily the all-singing-and-dancing godsend that was originally assumed. I was chatting to a contributor who shared my suspicions and had stopped trying to use his NAS drive. And I recall another contributor, returning from holiday, had to restart his server some 20 times before it began working.

“But a CD player is essentially a computer” is sometimes heard (though in truth it's really only a dedicated microprocessor). However, because it's a fixed standalone unit it doesn't connect to the internet, and therefore doesn't keep downloading software updates, which seems to be the curse that plagues all computers these days.

Granted it's not very convenient to have hundreds of silver discs, all with those horrid jewel cases, just hanging around and getting in the way. It's so much handier to store everything on a NAS drive. That's certainly true, but for me the core problem appears to be to do with timescales. Some of my favourite albums are 50 years old, which is long before personal computers came on the scene. And a few of my favourite CDs even go back to the days of floppy discs, long before the internet allowed the people developing computer software to go off at half cock on the basis that it can always be fixed and downloaded later. On the music side it's difficult to decide who is responsible: customer demand spurs the music industry into creating new standards and formats, internet streaming services react, and hardware makers are required to keep up.

In the days when vinyl and CD were developed, it was important to get things right 'first time' as there was little or no chance of changing things later. (The evidence is seen in numerous failures that also occurred!) Attitudes seem to have changed today. I've recently endured two spells of 'no internet', each lasting a week. While it was interesting to realise just how internet-dependent we've become, one of the Openreach guys who came and fixed the system told me that the 'fault' had been due to a software change that had stripped off my ID. He added that it was quite normal to start using software when it was just 80% finished, as it could always be updated after any bugs had revealed themselves.

Those internet incidents might not be strictly relevant to computer audio, but they do represent a similar attitude. I shall therefore carry on using my server as long as it continues working because it's so incredibly convenient, but I won't lose any sleep if it stops working again. And I'll keep my CD player well warmed up just in case.....

Paul Messenger

Editor

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Magico has released a MkII version of the S5. Martin Colloms reports on page 38

VOTU - The Voice Of The Universe

DESIGNED BY DEREK HUGHES, THIS NEW GRAHAM AUDIO MODEL IS ESSENTIALLY A DOMESTIC VERSION OF ITS HIGH QUALITY SYSTEM3D PUBLIC ADDRESS SYSTEM



Graham Audio might not have been around for as long as some of its BBC-oriented competitors, but it seems to have absorbed much of the heritage associated with this particular tradition, and has been granted the licences needed to build and appropriately describe a number of the classic BBC designs, including three stand-mount models – the ‘miniature’ *LS3/5* (quite deliberately without an ‘a’; see next issue), the substantial *LS5/8* and the compact *LS5/9*. The range also includes a much larger two-box speaker called *SYSTEM3D* which was initially developed as a high quality live sound reinforcement system for use in the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, but which could well start appearing elsewhere too.

A fifth model has just been introduced – at least been prototyped, as the examples that came in for review did turn out to be the only pair that had hitherto been made. It’ll be called the *VOTU*, an acronym for ‘Voice of the Universe’ (and a pastiche on Altec Lansing’s famous ‘Voice of the Theatre’ loudspeaker).

Like *SYSTEM3D*, it was designed by Derek Hughes, who headed up Spendor Audio Systems’ design team for several years following the death of father Spencer, and has a number of elements in common with its bigger brother, albeit with important differences too. The pair that arrived for review actually came in hefty flight cases, and

were indeed the first and only samples made so far, though they certainly looked and behaved like a proper production pair.

Naturally enough, since domestic living rooms are much smaller than Opera Houses, there’s significantly less bass output than that required to fill a large auditorium, and it therefore has one less bass driver than the larger two-box original – though the midrange and treble drive units both look very similar. The enclosure is significantly different too, of course: the *VOTU* has just one floorstanding enclosure, which is about 116mm tall. Thanks to using a three-part baffle, that splits on both sides of the uppermost bass driver, the front panel is slightly concave, a feature which will assist in improving time alignment between the drive units. Total weight here is around 65kg.

There’s no avoiding the sheer bulk of an enclosure that’s 37mm wide and 38–43mm deep, but the measures taken to minimise the visual impact of our prototype example are quite effective, and include a high gloss black finish and gently post-formed edges around the front. A plinth was supplied with the review pair but was not actually used, as a decision early on was made to use the Townshend spring-decoupled platforms instead. Indeed, a decision was made prior to production to eliminate the separate plinth entirely, and instead fit feet directly into the speaker.

The driver line-up itself consists of a pair of 250mm (10-inch) Volt drive units which handle the low frequencies, with the assistance of a front-mounted port of generous diameter. The crossover then hands the midrange duties over to a 75mm (3-inch) dome unit also from Volt, while the high frequencies are sent to a tweeter with a 34mm soft fabric dome diaphragm sourced from SEAS. All four drive units are mounted along the same central vertical line, and the tweeter is mounted below the midrange unit here, probably to ensure optimum time-alignment at the listening axis.

The rear of the enclosure has just a single pair of high quality input terminals, feeding an internal crossover with some very generous looking components. Some 26 brass woodscrews secure the

PAUL MESSENGER

back, which is temptation indeed for anybody (such as yrs trly) with a powered screwdriver. Internal examination revealed a couple of braces, one more substantial than the other.

Although the back and front are certainly substantial, the sides, top and base appear to be of thin-wall construction. These are first lined by bituminous felt, and this is then covered in a rather thicker foam-filled fabric-covered lining. The 'thin-wall' principle was originally a BBC initiative. The two key ideas are to move the unavoidable enclosure vibrations down from the midband to a lower frequency region where they are subjectively less intrusive, and also apply some damping to help control these vibrations.

While the *VOTU* is a ported design, that doesn't seem to be a particular disadvantage, even though such a technique might involve a measure of group delay. As one might expect, in our 5.7x2.7x4.5m room (medium-to-large, solid brick walls but suspended floor and ceiling), and with the port tuned to around 28Hz, there's some low bass excess. My in-room, far-field trace shows something like a 5dB average excess, but because this was only below 60Hz, it didn't seem subjectively particularly intrusive.

Indeed, this Graham Audio design is an excellent all round performer that can easily and comfortably compete with the rivals that I've encountered. The overall tonal balance, measured under in-room, far-field conditions, isn't entirely flat or smooth, but it nevertheless holds within ± 3 dB all the way from 70Hz to 10kHz, which is very creditable. An unusual factor, presumably related to the use of a 75mm dome driver for the midrange, is a mild degree of forwardness 1.4-2.4kHz, which is a part of the frequency range where speakers with cone midrange drivers tend to show some lack of output. The net result is a speaker with a modicum of 'character', but only enough to make it sound interesting, and it always manages to entertain (perhaps because it isn't entirely even?).



Sound Quality

The *VOTU* is actually a fun loudspeaker, thanks in part to its delightfully open balance. It might not match the broad midband smoothness of the B&W, lacking some output across the upper midband (250Hz – 1kHz) but it then recovers with a slightly forward presence octave (1.2 – 2.4kHz). My favouring such mild presence forwardness could well reflect my enthusiasm for dome-type midrange drive units, as something similar is seen in the in-room trace for PMC's *IB2SE*, which has long been one of my reference speakers.

The overall voicing is unquestionably classy here, and the speaker as a whole has low midband coloration and delivers an impressive soundstage, with fine focus and depth. Low level detail was easy to pick out, as the enclosure engineering has been very well judged to minimise any interference here. At the same time the *VOTU* provided dynamic expression that was convincingly vigorous and forthright.

Power amplifier problems inevitably made me a little cautious about exploring the loudness limits, but I certainly didn't encounter any difficulties with either the amplifiers or the loudspeakers while achieving realistic levels.

Conclusions

This Graham Audio speaker immediately filled me with confidence, as it has obviously been created by a seriously experienced design engineer. It might not have the smoothest tonal balance around, but this still stays within reasonable limits, and it offers a character that is at once attractively lively yet warm with it, and is both informative and welcoming. And although it's unquestionably a large loudspeaker, the clever concave front, post-formed edges and lacquer finish are all rather effective in minimising the impression of scale. It's not exactly inexpensive, but clearly deserves Recommendation nevertheless, albeit with the caveat that we did try a pre-production sample.

HIFICRITIC
RECOMMENDED

Manufacturer's Specification

Type	3-way ported enclosure
Finish	custom veneer or lacquer
Power Handling	1kW unclipped program
Recommended power	250 – 1000W
Sensitivity	88dB/2.83V/1m
Nominal Impedance	4ohms
Frequency Response	38-18kHz ± 3 dB
Drivers	Bass 2x250mm Midrange 75mm dome HF 35mm Dome
Size (WxHxD)	370x1150x430mm
Weight	65kg
Price	£13,950+VAT (ie £16,740 inc VAT UK)

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Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

HIFICRITIC

AUDIO AND MUSIC JOURNAL

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Martin Colloms, Publisher

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It's quite useful to have this back page available as a rolling diary, catching up with recent experiences and updating some of the things I might have overlooked. Saying that, this particular past quarter has been traumatic, thanks to multiple power amp failures. To summarise, I've been using a Naim *NAP500* with total reliability for around fifteen years (and *NAP135s* and *NAP250s* before that, going right back to the 1970s, again with utter reliability). However, I sent it back for a *DR* upgrade in mid-June, mindful of the fact that it would need 6-8 weeks running in after re-fettling, but unhappily, a week after it came back (and with Spendor's Philip Swift sitting right next to me), smoke arose from the power supply unit, due to a faulty component.

The '500 went back to Salisbury for repair, which took a week (thanks to an intervening bank holiday), so I installed an NVA *The Second Statement* as a replacement. Everything seemed to be working fine for a few days, but then the B&W boys arrived. Everything went swimmingly for an hour or so, and I was perfectly happy using the NVA amplifier as a substitute. Until, that is, Steve Pearce slipped a techno disc into the CD player. I then got carried away with the volume control, and I blew one of the NVA's channels. Timing couldn't have been worse as the 500 was already sidelined, so I had to dig out a very old (but recently serviced) *NAP250*, which happily worked out fine.

The 500 came back and I used it for another three weeks before I discovered another problem. This only revealed itself when I wound up the wick and started using serious power, whereupon one channel showed signs of instability. It was back to Salisbury for another week or so, and the problem this time turned out to be faulty soldering of a power transistor in the amplifier itself.

I'm not going to complain, as this is the first (and second!) time I've encountered any reliability problems with Naim components in forty or so years. And the *NAP500 DR* certainly sounded particularly good when it came back the second time. But the toing and froing has certainly chucked an unexpected spanner in the running-in and hence the reviewing procedures, for which I should apologise.

Why do I always discover niggles with digital audio devices after I've already written about them? I was certainly happy enough at getting Arcam's little *irDAC-II* to sort out my digital sources when it came to writing last quarter's *Subjective Sounds*, especially as it seemed to have sorted out the mild irritations I'd encountered with the *MkI* model.

Now I've found a new niggles that certainly affects the practicality of the *MkII* version. It doesn't seem to affect the co-ax or optical inputs that are used for my server and TV respectively, but the problem seems to involve the USB input which is normally used for my lap-top. If I switch the DAC on after the lap-top, all is well, and the lap-top recognises the presence of the DAC. However, when I shut down the lap-top and go to bed leaving the DAC on, the lap-top sometimes no longer recognises the Arcam DAC. In practice this can be rather inconvenient, as I tend to leave the DAC permanently 'on', but shut down the lap-top overnight, with the result that it sometimes (and somewhat unpredictably) loses the connection.

I also owe Andrew Rothwell an apology, for completely ignoring the M-C cartridge loading adjustment that is available on his *Headspace* step-up. It was only after we'd gone to press that I found the little bit of paper that told me to open up the unit and make the required adjustments to match cartridge and load...